

War Takes Ugly Turn

Death of Civilians in Viet Village Brings Charge of U.S. Terrorism

By Howard Margolis
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The war in Viet-Nam has never been pretty, but it has taken a peculiarly ugly turn with the recent flurry of reports of operations that, fairly or not, are bringing charges that U.S. forces are participating in terror operations against the civilian population.

High Administration officials yesterday insisted that they still did not know whether it was true that U.S. Marines from Danang deliberately burnt to the ground Tuesday a nearby village that had been harboring Viet Cong guerrillas.

They said that it was U.S. policy to conduct operations in a way to minimize civilian casualties.

But it has been clear for some time that at least some Administration officials are concerned about the effects on opinion at home and abroad of a steady stream of stories of U.S. participation in the bombing and destruction of villages.

According to news service dispatches from Viet-Nam, a force of Vietnamese troops

and U.S. Marines was sent to the village of Camne, and bulldozers, flamethrowers and, according to the accounts, pocket cigarette lighters were used to raze the village of about 150 homes. Four women and three children were reported killed along with nine armed guerrillas.

No one has denied that the intent of the mission was to destroy the village if there was any resistance to the sweep.

A statement was issued by the Marine Corps commander at Danang noting that a helicopter had flown over the village for an hour before the attack and told everyone to leave, and most, though obviously not all, did so.

The general said he wished to offer "deep sympathy to the loved ones of such innocent victims, as I do to the loved ones of the Marines who have given their lives."

The Pentagon view was that the incident was an unfortunate but unavoidable example of the kind of thing that happens in wars.

Officials said that the U.S.

role was not expected to include the pacification of villages, but that the village attacked Tuesday was close enough to Danang to require U.S. troops to participate in the strike as part of the military necessity of defending the base.

This includes what is called "aggressive patrolling" some miles beyond the base perimeter in order to prevent a Viet Cong buildup for the sort of surprise mortar attacks that have occurred so often.

All this has made the Camne incident something of a special case, not expected to be typical of what the newly arrived U.S. troops will be doing in the country.

Related Problems

But the incident has presented problems for the Administration, which has to explain to allies and neutrals why U.S. troops, in the course of defending a friendly country against aggression, find it necessary occasionally to burn villages to the ground.

A larger problem is also bothering some officials. Although the stories of U.S.

troops destroying villages have been limited, there have been a great many stories, with more to be expected, of U.S. airplanes participating in attacks on villages.

A striking example came a few weeks ago, when the military briefing officer in Saigon listed among the previous day's accomplishments that U.S. planes had destroyed a Viet Cong hospital.

"Free Bomb" Areas

Another problem is with the so-called free bomb areas in strongly Viet Cong held portions of the country, where U.S. planes are authorized to attack anything they see. When a plane fails to find its assigned target, it is authorized to go to a free bomb area and use up its bombs and ammunition there.

Some officials have privately suggested that as a matter of policy U.S. Forces might be forbidden to attack villages from the air even though that means that the Viet Cong would, in effect, be given sanctuary in villages whenever there were no ground troops in the area.

Deliberate attacks on civil-



United Press International

A Vietnamese family huddles together outside a home at Danang after an artillery barrage on their village. The action occurred Monday as American forces searched for Viet Cong snipers believed hiding in the area.

ians are clearly contrary to U.S. policy. According to the Pentagon, field commanders have been instructed to try to warn the inhabitants of a village scheduled for air attack or chosen as a free bomb zone. This still leaves questions of how effective the directives are in protecting civilians and how often vil-

lagers simply ignore the warnings.

High officials, questioned about these problems, tended to be noncommittal. The question of what limits might be set to what U.S. military forces should be permitted to do in the name of defending a friendly country remained unanswered.

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